

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson

“Blowing the Whistle on Retaliation: Accounts of Current and Former Federal Agency Whistleblowers”

June 11, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome.

Today’s hearing is incredibly important. Whistleblowers play an invaluable role in rooting out waste, fraud, abuse and mismanagement in the federal government. These men and women take great risk to stand up and expose wrongdoing. They sacrifice their careers, their reputations and often their financial security. Congress—and this committee in particular—must support federal whistleblowers and ensure that they are adequately protected from retaliation.

Congress has long recognized the importance of protecting whistleblowers who disclose mismanagement, waste, fraud and abuse in the federal government. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 sought to protect federal employees against reprisal for the lawful disclosure of information showing waste, fraud or illegal activity. In 1989, Congress passed the Whistleblower Protection Act, acknowledging that whistleblower furthers the public interest. In 2012, the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act (WPEA) was passed unanimously through this committee and signed into law by President Obama. This law expanded whistleblower protections and asserted the role of Congress as a recipient of whistleblower disclosures of wrongdoing.

Whistleblower protection is not just a congressional priority. In announcing his administration’s priorities, President Obama emphasized the importance of whistleblowers. “[O]ften,” he wrote, “the best source of information about waste, fraud, and abuse in government is an existing government employee committed to public integrity and willing to speak out. Such acts of courage and patriotism, which can sometimes save lives and often save taxpayer dollars, should be encouraged rather than stifled. We need to empower federal employees as watchdogs of wrongdoing and partners in performance.”

Today, this committee will hear from four whistleblowers who have agreed to testify about their experiences since blowing the whistle on waste, fraud and abuse. These four come from different agencies: the Department of Defense, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Social Security Administration, and Customs and Border Protection. Despite being from different agencies, each has reported similar retaliation since exposing government failures or wrongdoing. As this committee will hear today, “blowing the whistle” can sometimes lead to removal from one’s job, a suspension of pay, retaliatory investigations and, in extreme cases, termination.

As chairman of this committee, let me make abundantly clear that we are committed to empowering and protecting federal whistleblowers. I am a founding member of the Senate Whistleblower Protection Caucus, a bipartisan group with the specific goal of raising awareness about the need for adequate protections against whistleblower retaliation. I have created a unique e-mail address, whistleblower@ronjohnson.senate.gov, for federal employees and contractors to confidentially and safely communicate about malfeasance or misconduct. I encourage all whistleblowers to reach out to the committee if they have seen waste, fraud, abuse or wrongdoing in their federal workplaces.

I take these issues seriously, as many individuals have come forward to express concerns about waste, fraud and abuse within our government. Many times, individuals come forward after attempting to raise concerns within their agency. Some also reach out to the Office of Inspector General. In some cases, the Office of Inspector General seeks cooperation from federal employees who did not intend to become whistleblowers but who provided important information in investigating mismanagement and wrongdoing in the federal government. I encourage individuals to continue to contact inspectors general, and I will hold the IG community accountable to investigate the claims brought to their offices.

This hearing is long overdue, and I believe whistleblowers who courageously expose waste, fraud, and abuse are performing an incredibly important service to their fellow citizens. I applaud any whistleblowers who are willing to put their careers at risk and expose themselves to retaliation. I will not tire in this fight and I look forward to working with my colleagues in continuing to support federal whistleblowers.

###